THE TOWER
2022/2023

The Tower

University of Montevallo

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Editor's Note

Tower is an everchanging publication, but one aspect that continually remains consistent is that it's a work by students, for students. What is very shocking time then is that, despite this being a collection from so many different students from so many different backgrounds, that there were still some common themes that seemed to emerge as we were putting this collection together. There were many grim and supernatural pieces, yet to counteract that there was also just as many piece's that were more lighthearted and humorous. I feel like many of these pieces come from a common place- recovering from the effects of these past few years, and reading this collection just shows all the different ways that everyone has reacted and started to recover as we begin to move on.

I would like to thank Jada Bryant and Sabrina Knear for helping me to make this collection, as well as the rest of my staff, whether they be the social media manager, assistants, or readers in helping to make this book come together. I really appreciate everyone's help with this, and I don't think the book would've come together as quick- or as well put together- without their help.

I also want to thank you, the reader. Whether you're someone who submitted, a friend or family member of someone who worked on or submitted to Tower, or just a student who want's to see what the student body has to offer, it is because of you guys that we are able to operate and continue to do what we do. To be able to give student's an outlet and a chance to show off their work, they're able to get their name out there and better set themselves up for future success, whether it be through artwork, poetry, prose, or another avenue of creativity.

With that, I am proud to present this year's edition of Tower. Thank you.

-Blaine Richardson, Tower Editor-in-Chief

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The Stranger Project

N. Hollingsworth

New haircut, hair color, piercings, tattoos, and clothes,
I've insured that if you saw me on the street
you would have to do a double take,
a triple take for good measure.
But that's only if you remember the vaguest trace
of my facial features, now hidden

behind glittering metals rods, eyebags and bleach fried bangs.

New name, style, and pronouns,
I've hit the reset button.

We're back to square one, I've rewritten the person you knew,
buried them in an unmarked grave.
It's been three years and I've erased
any tracks that may lead you to me.

Three years yet I can't help but wonder what you've changed,
and if it was intended to keep me at bay.
What have you changed,
what have you broken,
reworked and reshaped?
Who is the you I'll never know?

We are two lines that once intersected on a graph
now cursed to spend the rest of our lives
drifting farther and farther into unrecognizable quadrants.

There will be apartments and houses we'll never give the other a tour of,
partners we'll never introduce,
stories we'll never frantically tell each other over the phone
in between gasps and wheezes and laughs.

Once best friends,
knowing every nook and unkempt cranny,
every line in each others face,
to strangers that won't even exchange a glance.
Let's never meet again, old friend.
Continue to grow and change;
form into someone I would never have guessed you to be.
Let us continue to peel our glued skin from each other
and savor the burn.
From friends to strangers.

Reflections
Frida Gonzales

A Night Dark And Grim

Krista Rein

a hush fell upon the town,
the lights became slowly dim.
a woman in a lilac gown
sighed when she thought of him.

the stars barely illuminated the night,
twinkling despite the pollution.
the woman stared out the window out of spite,
looking for a resolution.

a neighbor's snoring could be heard,
with the dog howling at the moon.
the woman spoke not a word

instead, she hummed a soft tune.

night is inevitable, it always arrives.
to every beginning, there is an end.
the woman knew his other wives,
and lost a long-time friend.

clouds passed over the night sky,
the wind blew them west.
the woman had her hopes high,
she put her mind to the test.

a hush fell upon the scarlet room,

the mood became slowly grim.

a woman in a lilac gown witnessed her lover's doom,

as she had murdered him.

Compound Eyes
Nico Crow

Moving On
Bo Ferguson

I wash my sheets. I wash my hair.

I move out of my basement, and back into my bed.

I delete the playlist we made off my phone. I can't bring myself to delete pictures of you. Not yet.

I pick up the things that used to bring me joy. I take baths, paint, laugh. I begin to love myself the way you never did.

But most importantly, I don't cry anymore when I think of you.

Of what we were.

I'm beginning to leave you behind.

City Progress
Blue Smith

Ursa Major

Rose Davis

For a Bear

You are Atlas,
Holding up my sky.
And I trace the outline of your face
in the darkness of the light.
Flesh is cracked with the weight,
With the stars installed on your back.
That constellation frame, wide,
shining brighter in the rural fields
of this damned state.

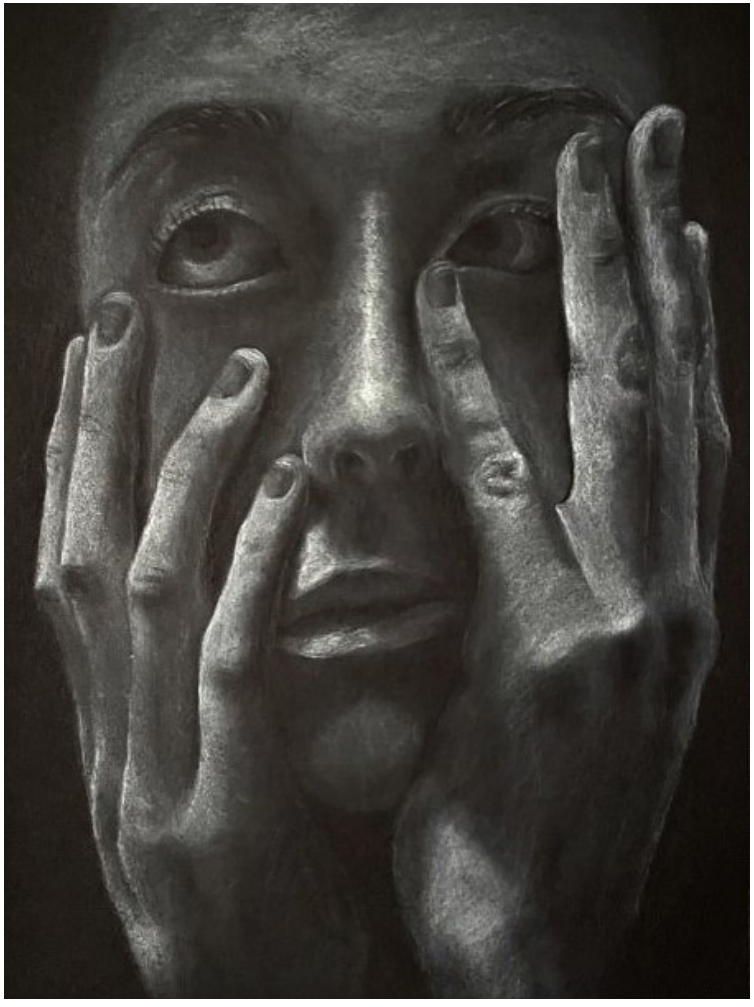
Let me be what Hercules wouldn't.
Let me hold your hand in sleep,
and grasp me, made of pillars.
The universe is but marble
between our digits.
You are my Ursa Major,
Pointing towards our North.

We leave these borders
of telescope lens sky.
And your body is marked
by hundreds of shooting stars.
Our sky is black tonight.

The Drowning Girl

Jay Watts

Trapped.
She is trapped, a million emotions pressing in on all sides
she can't get above it all to take a breath.
She tried everything she's fighting against the waves
at every chance she has
but she can't get out.
An undertow of advice pulling her every which way,
she just wants it to stop,
needs it stop,
needs the water to still
needs her lungs to fill.
But there is a second option…
one she doesn't want to consider but is being forced to,
She herself could just stop.
Stop fighting
stop struggling,
stop breathing.
Peace would come then,
a soft darkness that is serene and calm she longs for it.



Drained
Summer Burress

Burn a Friend

Des H.

When I think about you I suffocate.
The DETCADER name caught in my throat,
Burning me raw, forcing me to swallow hot coals of adoration.
Sinking to the bottom of my charred pit.
Grasping for air, my lungs are filled with smoke.
As your lies scorn my couloir with scorching hellfire,
A new inferno burns deep within me.
Enigma energy crackles through my seared flesh.
Guttural screams of silence drown the empty hallways of my fucked memory.
Railless memories that are filled with junk.
Shit you thought I would take with a tugged smile,
A forced band I couldn't hold much longer.
Hot plasma oozes from my molten core,
My mind combusting in flames--
Each step I take sets the ground ablaze,
My face melted off from putrid hate.
My limbs aren't frigid,
My eyes are torrid.
My heart bares nothing but animosity.
As the now smoke-filled cavern that is my head ponders,
My soul longs for amity.

Anxious
Jada Bryant

Becoming Chimera

Rebecca Reeves

I'll become whatever pleases you
Anything that you desire
Every shift to bring me closer to you
Changing is my process

I will become a dog
Wag my tail, overjoyed to see you
Give me a command to follow
I'll obey any order

I will become a rabbit
Gentle and shy
Make me your prey
Trap me with your intentions

I will become a lizard
Able to heal my broken limbs
Watch me as your cold overcomes me
Leave me frozen and still

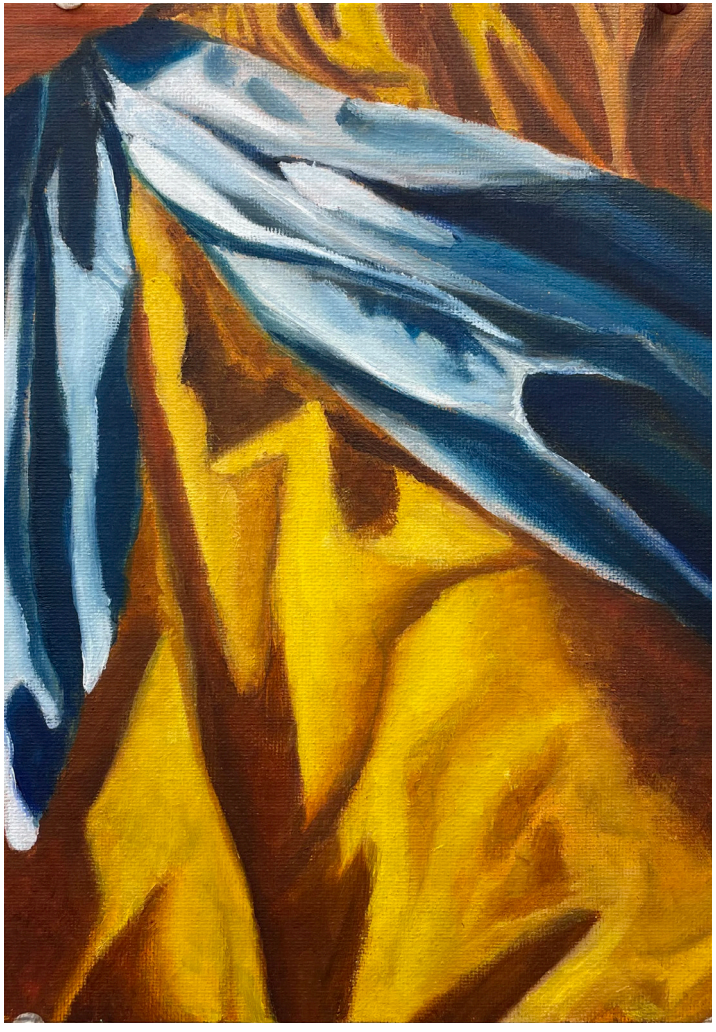
I will become a bat
Hear every sweet lie you say
Soak them in, blind me to your sins
Plunge me into darkness

Do my shifting forms please you?
Do they satisfy your desires?
Every shift to get closer to you
I lost myself in the process

Tama
Mak<3

Let's Go to Heaven
Naur

Magic!
Grace McDermitt



Cloth Studies #1
Frida Gonzales
(Scumbling)

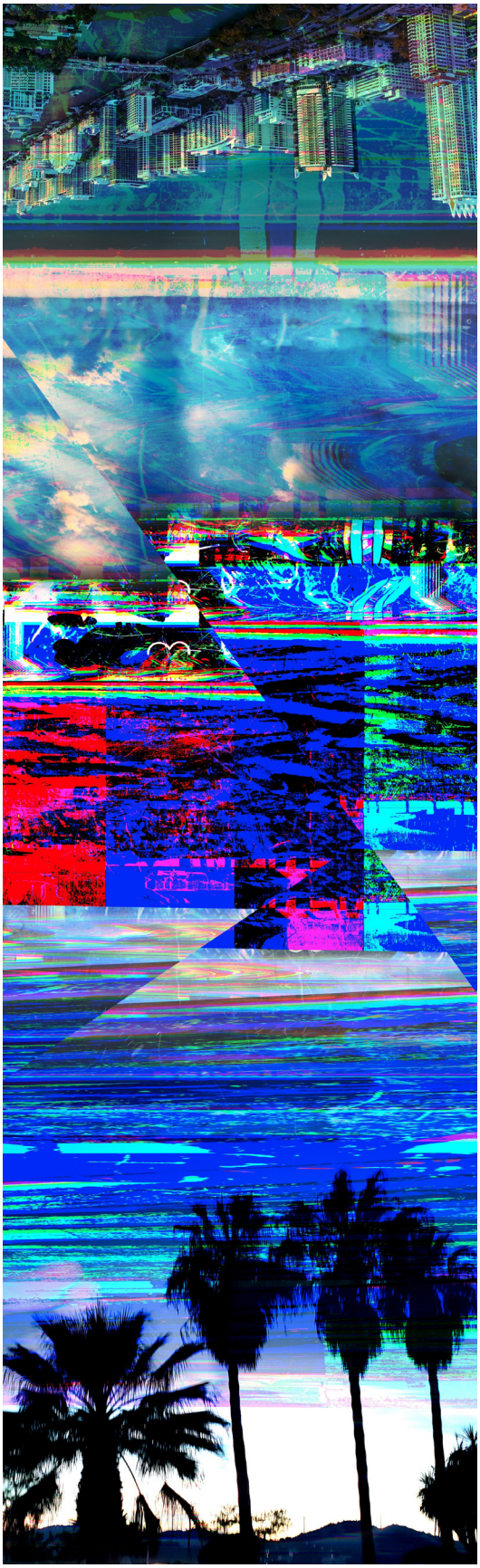
Cloth Studies #2
Frida Gonzales
(Glaze)

Cloth Studies #3
Frida Gonzales
(Impasto)

no thing shall be a single thing.

Ifan Schallock

twin flames are two pieces grafted
together like branches on a tree,
metals bonded into an alloy or
parasite-and-host. no thing shall
be a single thing. come not in singles
but in battalions, conjoined like twins,
inseparable. we share our organs,
we share our breaths. i am the hand
to your eye, the blade to your knife.
no thing shall be a single thing, and
the lovers are not chained by the devil,
and the tower does not burn. the red
string binds us, my bones are your bones
and your teeth are my teeth. we are
hunter-and-prey, hati and sköll
chasing the celestial bodies to swallow
whole. the light singes me, but you
are there to tend the wound. no thing
shall be a single thing and i am not
alone in this. brother sleep and sister death,
i am the raven flying above and you
are the wolf below. we rend and break
and devour together. no thing shall be
a single thing and you are not alone
in this.



Isekai 1
Joli

No Good Left

Jada Bryant

No good is left to give.
Too much good giving can't be real.
My heart has had no time to heal.
Instead, I hide behind a mask so no one knows how I really feel.
I've put all my pain in a space of hope that they just disappear.
But how my body will guide me to peace is what I fear.
Sleepless nights, mindless fights, plans of the future lost in sight.
There's no way not to be uptight.
It's a constant battle between "what's for the best" and "should I ask for help?"
Although it's asked how I felt, answering truthfully just doesn't feel right.
Pleasing the "bright side" is what keeps me here.
Cause it's always the spirit whispering in my ear.
" Don't quit! Remember what your purpose is."
The constant back and forth is getting really tiring.
Yeah that may be a part of life but what about that is aspiring?
A young girl who has to move forward just cause.
In the hopes that her future will bring her more love.
She appreciates the stable love that's in the present.
This love is just the type of love that keeps her resting.
For the sake of what can be done and what can't, she'll take the stressing.
So in this phase of her life, she'll pretend to love the life she has to live.
In her next life though she'll be careful because there will be no good left to give.

Eulogy of a Friend

Bo Ferguson

I long for the days of pinky promises and of second chances.

When the biggest worry in my life was who my best friend was at the moment. And not why he's gone.

I miss smelling my mother's rose perfume as I curled against her, scared of the storms.

Of playing in the daylily garden at grandmama's, that sweet scent enrobing my summers.

I miss a lot of things. But you especially.

I miss your laugh, the way your face furrowed into so many lines when you thought, the warm sun as we laid sprawled in the garden.

How I wish you could see me now. Grown, accomplished, strong.

I have dedicated my life to being the things you never got to be.

The life, we never got to live.

Paper Cranes

N. Hollingsworth

After Wendy Cope

It was noon when I gave myself the task-
learn to make paper cranes.
And with a heavy hand, I began.
I folded and crinkled and wrinkled
the thin piece of paper into the implication of a bird.

It was ugly and lumpy,
The air of delicacy I tried to obtained was squashed
in between messy, imperfect folds.
I still showed you my work, and you laughed
which got me laughing.
And there we sat together in a moment of peace
over the ugliest excuse for a paper crane we'd ever seen.

This was my life now,
trying and failing and laughing at ordinary things.
Writing, drawing, sitting in the rain,
dancing, feeling the breeze on my shoulders,
everything human, everything alive and easy and
lightly laced with our laughs.
I can keep living like this.
I'm satisfied with the imperfect.

Love Letters to a Dead Boy

Bo Ferguson

"This is my last attempt to gain control". Those were the last words my friend ever wrote, and they would change my life forever. Martineau was my best friend, my confidante; and it came as quite the malicious surprise when he didn't get better. We didn't understand it, Martin was always a sickly kid — he always had that pale greenish skin combined with a boney figure that evoked feeling of sympathy — but this, this was different. What seemed like a nasty case of flu ended up with him lying rather gravely in a hospital bed, surrounded by a colorful expanse of flowers and cards wishing him to "get well soon" and that he'll "be back in shape by May". But the truth was, we had no idea what to expect. His illness was undefined, had no name. Test after test was conducted, yet it still loomed over us ever mysterious. The doctors could only theorize what was wrong and what would happen. I was seven when we met, fourteen when he first got sick, and fifteen when he died. It was late November, he was given a week to spend at home with his family for Thanksgiving. It was at this moment that Martin made up his mind. For once in his life, he would make the decision, he refused to let some unknown illness take his life. It would be under his own accord. I now realize that all Martin ever wanted was to have control in his life. His mother, a terribly high-strung and capricious woman, parented him with the iron fist that she was raised with. No one would blame her of course, she merely wanted her son to continue the legacy of their family's honor. The feeling of not being able to choose killed Martin, not his family or the illness. I remember exactly where I was when his sister called me. I had never understood what people meant

when they said their life flashed before their eyes. But now I did. Martin's death made me understand what it meant to recalibrate, his death made me realize how unexpected life could be, and that to continue living the way I had would be a disservice to myself. The day that he killed himself, he wrote a letter to the each of us in the group, Elizabeth, Caroline, Nicholas, and I. That letter is my prized possession, something I value above all else. They are his parting words to me, his farewell. His letter changed the way I live. It opened my eyes to so much in life: the unexpectedness, the unfairness. When he first died, I was angry. Angry at a world who could make someone so young be consumed by an illness. Angry at the doctors, unable to find a cure. At most angry at myself, unable to stop this mysterious disease, this demon with no name from taking away someone who I loved. In the end I realized there was no bringing him back, and no one to blame. His death matured me in a way only death can — it enlightened me. One has to live like it is their last day, *Carpe Diem.*

Love your Melanin

Eboni McCoy

My skin is as dark as a choclate bar.
And Sparkles just like a shooting star.
Melanin is beatiful, no matter what shade.
One day, our beauty standards will change.
Colorism eats away at our minds, and causes aere tongues to be unkind.
People need to understand, colorism has high Demnads.
It shouts and screams, while light skin people Dream.
Dark skin people are tired of pain.
It's time for the world to change its ways.

Other Worldly
Jaylnn Brooks

Perfectionism

Zoe Dixon

"Mature for your age" is my domain, "burnt out" my kingdom and "ex gifted kid" my phylum.

Every easy assignment, each word of encouragement I receive is burned like coals in the furnace of my chest.

Starved for more I dig endlessly to satiate an urge I cannot see or touch.

That disease, perfection was slipped into my sippy cup like arsenic into tea, unseen, it coats my throat and echoes in my speech.

Like a fungus it spreads its mycelium through my mind, connecting my passions and pursuits into a superorganism of toxicity.

Roots reaching down into my lungs restrict my breathing without release until the deadline has passed only to be followed by another and another.

Through my arms it reaches, indistinguishable from veins, my fingers freeze before even a single pen stroke, "If it isn't perfect it's pointless."

With this equation as my doctrine, I follow it like a heavenly light across this churning sea of uncertainty, a prophet of the

myth: perfection.

Blinded I walk and pray that the stones will find my feet, accomplishment my sword and shield, achievement worn like a talisman around my neck to ward off what lies beyond the path laid before me.

Afraid that what lurks can smell my fear, I mask it with the perfume of humility and clothe it in faux strength, avoiding my mirror which sees through my disguise, my own gaze a giveaway.

Like monkey bars in a playground, others meet my standards with a mere stretch while I must face an endless climb comparable to Mt. Everest, my climbing rope sliced by the knife in my own hand.

I am enriched and impressed by those around me and live to see their success, every flower's uniqueness filling my heart, yet I cannot see the beauty growing at my very own feet.

I cannot enjoy the freedom of making for fear of imperfection, were I a spider I'd have made and destroyed a thousand webs seeking symmetry.

My thirst for perfection lulls me with a song of fulfillment, like a snake it winds its way around my throat, tighter with each passing day.

Caught up in an endless race like a dog chasing its own tail to a point of exhaustion I have to command myself "Stop!

Remove your talisman and wash away your disguise, throw

your sword and shield aside as you step away from the path for a moment and gaze at the mountain from the valley.

Perfection is disingenuous. It is stale and flavorless and it crumbles in the mouth, leaving it dry.

Look at the jagged rocks that pierce through the heavens haphazardly and see that beauty is not synonymous with perfection.

Perfection is not some unseeable god one can gain favor from with worship and prayer, laying unlimited quests for glory upon your weary shoulders.

Let go of the invisible reins you've strapped around your wrists and allow your feet to wander, unguided."

Warning Signs

Isabelle Mitchell

1st of March, 6089:

The first observation I take note of is the heat. The air flowing from the depths of the shallow cave holds the same power as the fire I burn for shelter each night. Though, where the heat is coming from is more of a concern to me than the sweat I can feel beading on the back of my neck.

The water is blue, crystal clear, and innocent. It holds ripples even though the pond contains no animal life. The plants at the bottom glow pink and the shells shimmer a pearly white, half buried in the brown sand.

My hands, already caked in dirt, push into the sand as I search with blind hope for whatever could give me answers. Closing my eyes, I feel the wind shift quickly, causing my arrows in their quiver to release a gentle clink and my hair to switch directions. There is a soft echo of wind chimes somewhere in the distance, a warning.

I remove my hands and brush the sand off as frustration builds up quickly. There is nothing. Absolutely nothing. The pool glows menacingly and I watch the wind pick up more in the greenery. The pool wasn't here a year ago, the magic seems to be creeping back into this world, and I'm not sure if I should be worried or not.

Shifting back on my knees, I settle to take in the surroundings. The slow buzz of old machines seems to vibrate the rest of the room further back. I can never tell if they truly work or if it's only the echoes of memories from the past. Dark vines travel in twisted roads up the

walls and around the technology, leaving only the original communications pad in the middle of the room exposed. This old room, which has been eaten away into a cave, once held the leftover civilization they referred to as the Watchers. Now there are only two of us left.

I turn my gaze to the mouth of the cave as dark wood creaks in the wind at the edge of the forest. Dark scraps of worn-out metal scatter the ground and the trees shift to cover the sun, leaving the hairs on the back of my neck standing up. The bushes move to the right of the cave and I quickly stand in a defensive position. Not many things in these woods could hurt me, but with the paranoia of the pool and the warnings maybe I should be more cautious.

My breath releases quietly as I recognize the three clicks of a bumble fox and I lower my stance. "You can come out now Crew," I say and crouch back down as my friend tumbles out. I watch the white fox circle me then sniff the pool, finally coming to sit in front of me. His blue accents shine the same color as the pool, and his eyes pierce my soul, holding the color of hydrangeas.

"What do you think it is?" I ask, tilting my head towards the shallow pool, as I scratch behind his ear. He responds with another pattern of clicks and darts to the other side of the cave, sitting down on the dark stone platform and clicking again.

"The comms pad? Crew, you know as well as I do that we probably won't live to see it light up. Besides, the pool seems to be… consuming the mechanisms." I run my fingers gently over top the water, watching the ripples reach Crew as he leans down excitedly, pushing his nose just barely past the water line until he can blow bubbles at the tiny waves. I laugh and stand once more.

"Come on, buddy, let's go back to camp, Mellow is waiting

for us and you know she hates when we show up after dark." I am met with another series of clicks and watch him shake the water droplets off his snout before he trots back out the entrance of the cave.

I take one more look at the pool and its slow connection to the only hope for civilization. I frown, take in the vines that crawl up the cave and around the machines left over, and turn around, ready to head back to camp.

1st of June, 6089:

Nature is changing, or maybe evolving. The path I'm on has gained the new roots of a new species of tree that has bright green trunks and dark brown leaves. In my opinion, the countryside is prettier than where the old cities reside. That's where things get darker as the trees connect through the skyscrapers which create a "second sky" as Mellow calls it. It's hard to see there, and the place is overrun with hybrid creatures I would rather not disturb.

Crew trots ahead with a slight click with every other hop, but my amusement goes unnoticed. I'd like to think he believes he's my protection, but I know from past experiences that he isn't as brave as he projects. I watch him jump and I follow his lead as we both pass over a wing detached from an old spaceship that failed to evacuate with the rest of civilization.

The wind picks up and I shiver despite the direct sunlight and heat. The woods seem tense, have they always been that way? I shake the cold away and extend my neck to face the sun. Squinting my eyes, the sun looks the same as it has always looked. The generations of lost time, however, have resulted in a front-row seat to the up-close viewing of both Jupiter and Saturn. They rotate fast in the sky, and I lower my eyes, remembering all the times I feared they would crash into us as a little girl. That fear doesn't matter quite as much anymore.

Picking up speed to reach my destination, Crew suddenly stops dead in his tracks. I lower my body as quickly as he does and listen closely. The world may be free of humans, but danger is still around some corners. I hear leaves rustle, Crew's ears flick from left to right, and he huffs before continuing. I peer up and into the trees to see the first sighting of the mice.

For as long as I can remember, and for as long as Mellow can remember, our dying society has made the short trek to the mangle trees. These twisty trees are home to the mangle fruit, better known to me as mouse fruit. A sweet fruit resembling an orange with a blue center filled with sour jelly to make my nose scrunch. When Mellow was a kid a new species of mice moved into these trees and now, in order to enjoy the delectable fruit, you have to be wary of the little warriors. They aren't violent. They just value 'their' fruit over what I would call logic. In one wrong move, you'll get a whole army of purple mice nibbling your behind.

Crew especially hates these creatures since he's had experience in the nibbling department.

The solution, I've found, is to gather the fruit that grows at the lowest part of the twisty trees. The mice will allow this with sharp supervision of course. Suffice it to say it's both a funny and stressful job. Today seems like a calm stay, and I move to pick a few as quickly and quietly as possible while ignoring the clicks Crew makes as he watches dozens of beady little eyes pop up from the tree limbs to observe.

I pick my last fruit, shoving them into my shallow bag made of plastic and the hair from a drudge bear- a long-haired species native to the west side of what was once San Francisco. Turning my back on the odd creatures, I chuckle at Crew's blatant fear and click for him to follow me out of the tree grove.

I let the breeze drift over me once more as I steer my direction toward the cave holding my one and only task of checking for changes. I ignore the warning goosebumps that I've become accustomed to, knowing this routine check will hold no change.

8th of July, 6089

"What happens if I drink the water?" I ask and bend down to scratch Crew's chin.

"I don't know." Mellow replies shortly. She's currently digging through an old storage bin that used to be full of technology taken from a theme park in Hollywood. The park isn't really there anymore but Mellow said she collected most of the scraps when she was a kid. I have no idea what exactly it is she's looking for.

"Do you think I'll be immortal?" I ask in order to keep the very interesting conversation going.

"I don't know." She replies and continues to make a mess in her urgent search. I sigh and drop the one-sided talk, using the time to observe. She's wearing the red coat meant to identify the watchers, but with no one around, it kind of has lost its fashion sense a hundred years ago. Personally, I've never worn one and I have no idea why she's wearing it.

Mellow used to wear it during my training lessons. She could get a bit… intense when it comes to training. For a watcher, training comes with specialties. There are defenders and gatherers, but the most important job goes to those instructed to maintain and watch the communications pad. Seeing as it's only Mellow and I now, training for me consisted of every job.

Yet, my training has been over for years. Technically it ended when I turned sixteen but Mellow has always kept

up the tradition of "training" every few months. She likes to say it "keeps me on my toes." I notice further that she has her hair down today. One thing about Mellow is that she values neatness and order, she doesn't like much mess and she certainly doesn't like wearing her hair down, opting to usually leave it in braids. Neat, tight braids. I don't like that her hair is down.

To finish off the look, she is wearing her normal everyday attire topped with her shin pads. She explained that she had taken a short trip to one of our water sources earlier- The Colorado River. It's the cleanest and closest body of water and there is a small output our people put in a few hundred years ago that makes the whole trip easier. The only problem was the nearby company or the reason for the shin guards. The output and surrounding areas tend to be the home of the Flat-footed boating ducks, a particularly vicious species with razor-sharp teeth. They are easy to avoid and if you throw a chunk of meat at them, they'll remember and respect you forever. I've only seen them a few times but the one time I accidentally did get close without meat, Crew came home with a chunk out of his tail. He doesn't like making that trip anymore.

"Aha!" Mellow cries and backs out quickly causing Crew and I to jump out of the way. I followed the short old woman to her hut and waited for her to gather what she needed.

"Today is the day." She says and turns to me with an overexcited, creepy smile.

"What's special about today?" I ask as she shoves a couple of bags in my hands, both filled to the brim with flowers.

"Today we visit the graves." She replies like it's a triumph to admit, a smile still etched on her face as she grabs a few more bags and takes off in the direction of the hills. It's a fairly short trip but it's in a direction we don't usually

take, the hills are safe but don't go on forever. Past them is the desert which is known for its fire tornados and large, aggressive lizards. Crew starts to follow her and I hitch the bags more securely on my shoulder before walking after them. The air is hot and humid and I think about ways the ducks like to cool off.

The graves are a mass burial of the watchers that came before me. The hills roll and I am unable to see the horizon, standing by Mellows side looking over thousands of mismatched headstones. Their names are etched out with knives, the older they are the less likely you can read them. Most are buried neatly and with dignity. I briefly wonder who will bury me.

Mellow resumes her trek and I follow her to the most recent headstone, a big block of concrete that was taken from an old building that had fallen. My father died when I was six. It was only the three of us, so when he passed, Mellow took over. I don't remember that much, as Mellow did a good job of filling my life with love so it didn't seem like any was missing. I was told my mother passed when I was born. Their headstones sit next to each other.

Mellow pays her respects down the line of those she can remember, placing flowers down from the bags she had snatched from me walking up. Stopping at the next free plot, she sits on her knees and looks up at me with a smile, the light reflecting her green eyes, sheltered by smile lines detailing a happy life. She pats the ground next to her softly. I sit and let Crew squeeze his way between Mellow and I. Mellow drags a bony hand over his ears slowly and he clicks a few times.

"My time is near." She says not looking at me, her peaceful gaze focused on the sky as it turns from a soft blue to a softer shade of purple, the first sign of nightfall. Crew whines and her strokes continue through his fur.

"That's morbid" I reply, vaguely feeling like someone pulled the ground out from under me. She snaps her neck up with her signature scowl.

"Don't be smart, you need to finish your training." She snaps and seems to come back down to Earth as she aggressively begins to unpack her bags.

"I have finished my training," I say carefully as she shoots another glare my way, not really paying attention. She pulls out a big piece of thick sheet metal, some tools, and her hunting knife from one bag and then pulls more flowers from her other bag. I watch as she digs a shallow hole in line form before shoving the sheet metal in so it would stay upright. She digs another hole, this one is deeper and off to the side like all the others. She pushes a metal cylinder in the hole and then fills the hole with the flowers she brought before sitting back to shove her knife in my hand.

"When your Father passed and left me with a machine in the form of a child, I never thought we would make it. I thought about being the last for a long time, it bothered me in the beginning." She said and went back to gazing at the slowly darkening skies.

"And now?" I ask, wanting her conclusion of our predicament.

"You get to figure that one out on your own." She says with a soft smile before lifting her hand to cup my cheek.

"And my training?" I ask, curiosity always eating away at my heart.

"Before I leave you, I have one final lesson." She says letting her hand fall away before pulling my hand with the knife up to the rusty piece of metal. She starts to push the knife with

my hand which prompts me to relax and let her. I watch her use my own hand to carve out letters and I sit up straighter at the sudden need to cry.

"Even in the darkest moments," She says, dropping my hand with a smile before placing hers on my chest, "Don't forget where you come from."

In loving memory of

Mellow Crives

14th of August, 6089

I buried her early this morning with the sunrise. She enjoyed the colors and the early breeze that came with the dawn of a new day, so I thought it would be appropriate. The world feels quieter and I miss her already. I am alone.

Making my monthly trip to the comms pad is difficult knowing I only ever did it 'cause Mellow said it was our duty, but I know as well as she did that it's become a hopeless venture.

Crew follows me closely as if he can sense my lazy sorrow. He sniffs the air every few minutes in case he needs to warn me of the unknown, but today has granted me silence. No warning signs, no wind, no growth, just peace. I am thankful.

It's the noise that's caused me to miss what is right there. The old temples on the east side of these woods are now almost covered in the very vines that erase history for sport. The statues have fallen, and the old air has vanished. Our people told stories of the ancient Golden Gate Bridge collapsing and how the oceans have taken over like the old gods in fairy tales. Nature is taking over and fighting back. The truce we hold is dwindling as I am the last human on

Earth. My hope is in its patience.

I wish I would have asked more questions about our past or the details of the Watchers' origins and the reason we were truly left behind. The knowledge had been passed down for years and yet it seems to have been forgotten with time.

When we reach the pool it doesn't look like it did last month. Regardless of its stillness, it looks alive. It looks like it's gained strength. The comms pad is now completely submerged in the shallow waters. I doubt it works.

Bending down, I survey the status of the machinery and how the deeper blue encroaches on where the signal would be. The water stares back as I examine my face, the dirt that has been permanently etched in my pores is more obvious now than it has been in the past. I think of Mellow and past watchers as ripples arise on the surface, objecting at the salty invaders that escape from my eyes. The pool isn't the only being that has changed.

21st of December, 6089:

I awake to a long, harsh series of clicks.

"Go away," I say tiredly and get no difference in response. My bones creak as I rise with a stretch of my arms, and a sudden high-pitched whine makes me jump. I pause at the thought of something being wrong. I push out of the shelter and peek around the door. I've never seen a bumble fox this far out other than Crew, but it never hurts to be cautious.

Crew continues his panicked clicking as he shoves open the entrance faster than I have time to assess the situation and begins tugging at my shirt. Cold, sharp air hits my neck, and I hiss at the intrusion. The clicking has somehow sped up and I have the quiet thought that Crew sounds awfully like a

cicada with the harsh rhythm.

"Alright, alright. What's got your fur standing up?" I ask as I tug on my winter coat and pull out my bow with an arrow already knocked. I stumble out of the shelter space and start sprinting after the clicking animal, once he had seen me on my feet he had taken off.

I quickly caught up with him while observing the path that led us to whatever destination he was leading me. The dark is highlighted as the tree tops cover the bright projection of planets much closer than my ancestors could have pictured. The trees shift as the wind picks up. We pass the mangle trees and both Crew and I almost get knocked over by the large number of mice making their way back up them. I make an effort to keep up with Crew and not let the forest creature's panic frighten me or slow me down.

Trees ache in the rough treatment as I hear the wind chimes stationed throughout Watcher territory chime loud and long with urgency. The leaves shift and beckon us forward as Crew picks up speed. I watch with increasing alarm as the racket owls circle around the trees and hurry to get back to their homes in blurs of silver and purple. They usually protect the woods at night.

We turn at the juncture, and I stop short, causing Crew to spin around and resume his panic at the sight of my hesitance. This path only leads to the cave. The very cave that holds the communications pad. The wind shifts directions as quickly as the birds, and the realization dawns on me. I hear the deep voice of the wind chimes once more.

I bypass Crew quickly, and seeing that I understand now, he chooses to follow. I haven't visited in months, and I regret it quickly. The cave entrance is completely covered by black and green vines tightening like a knot. I pull out my arrow and use the end to make space for an entrance.

I hear it before I see it.

Beep

Beep

Beep

Its light illuminates the magical pool that has doubled- no, tripled-in size. Training runs through my head. I open the panel placed on the far wall and pull the computer out to answer the phone. They ask for confirmation of life forms and then will receive my coordinates to dispatch a crew of people to survey the land and determine if the Watchers' diagnosis is correct. That is if the diagnosis of livability is up to their standards. Then I will not be the only human on this planet.

Yet, I don't move. The signal continues to beep. It will be until communication is reached. I take a step forward, and Crew clicks nervously. The next step makes the wind pick up, and I can hear the wind chimes once more.

I slowly switch directions and begin to submerge in the pool, shocked by the temperature as I shuffle and wade to what once stood proud as the comms pad. My fingers tenderly cup the signal like Mellow used to in order to wipe my tears, would she be proud of me now?

Beep

Beep

Beep

I think of the old monuments turned to ash, I think of the

pictures drawn depicting the end of humanity as a giant ball of fire, I think of the peace and equality nature brings. I turn towards my friend and survey his stature. He would not exist if humans had not left. The mangle trees and their furious protectors wouldn't provide fruit and entertainment if it weren't for the death of society.

The noise and light grow persistent and the water is up to my stomach when I'm sitting on my knees. The pool trembles and the cold has turned me numb. The vines move like snakes in the trick of light and shadows. I wouldn't be here if humans had not left. My decision has been made.

Beep

Beep

Beep

I let my eyes settle on the device and feel a wave of calm wash over me. I repay that kindness. I stand and take another look around this room with no intention of moving closer to where the receiver sits. I so diligently devoted my life to this place, and I think back to every Watcher that devoted their life, too. No more. It is time for this place to rest. The signal gets louder as I retrieve my dropped items with a renewed sense of peace. I turn and walk out with Crew at my feet.

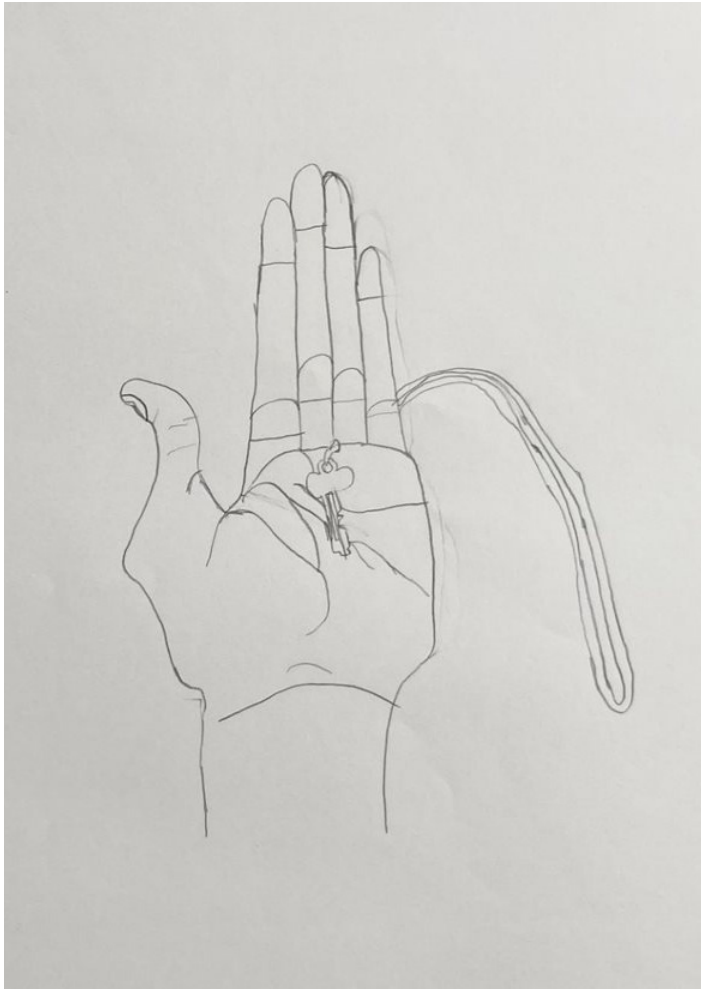
"I like Yellow Green"

Jo Ro

Yellow Green, I like you,
Your slinky ways fascinate me,
you taste like shit,
and you make my eyes hurt.
But I still like you
I never really had time for all your bullshit;
All you ever do is cheat and wink and nudge and lie.
But I still like you.
You have always made me confused;
I started speaking backward and writing with my left hand.
You like still I But.
Sometimes I cry thinking about the way we used to laugh;
Knots were tying themselves into knots at the time,
it really hurt to feel like that,
But I still like you.

Do you ever think about me, Yellow Green?
Does my flashlight lifestyle still interest you?
Do I still taste palatable?
Do I still soothe your sore ears?
Do you ever think about me?
Do you still plan out vacations with me?
I know you wanted to go to Cuba and Spain and Fiji
Do you ever think about me?
I know it wasn't easy,
I never really made things easy.
But I always think about you.

Do you still like me?



It's All In Your Hands
Matthew Cooley

Untitled:
Carly

My bones are brittle.

My body is soft.

I am like a child.

I saw color with you.

You enlightened me.

Now you are gone and my body is rusty nails.

I am tired.

I see in grey and white.

Change:

Carly

We got a new couch.

The red one is gone, replaced with a tan one covered in my new dog's hair.

You never met her.

The kitchen table is different. You have not cooked at this one.

My hair has grown out. It has been dyed, cut, and stripped of you.

We have changed rooms. I am no longer in the room that haunts me.

Everything is different. Even the dog you knew is dead. Cancer.

So why does my skin feel your lingering touch?

It is like a scar, something that never goes away.

Like a wine stain on a red dress or the makeup stains on a pillowcase.

I have taken many showers. I have taken many baths.

I have scrubbed my skin numb, but your fingerprints are still there.

You traced my body.

I said no.

I begged no.

I have scars in the shape of your fingertips.

I was 14. Too young, too fresh.

The question is why?

I am scared of you.

I have not seen you in three years.

Yet I never deleted our pictures.

I have a polaroid of you somewhere, proof that you were there.

I hate you, in fact I despise you. You are the only one I loathe.

Everything has changed, yet when I go to the grocery store I duck when I see someone with your hair.

Any trace of your figure and I forget how to breathe.

You come to me in my nightmares.

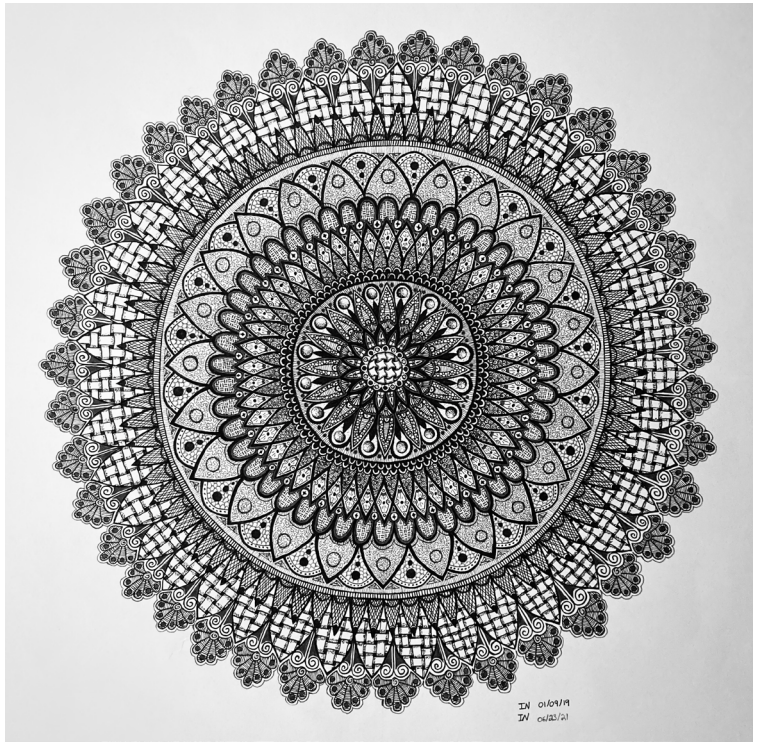
I awake in sweat just to feel your presence again.

You have forgotten about me. You probably call me crazy to your friends.

But you are everywhere. Everything has changed. Everything has changed.

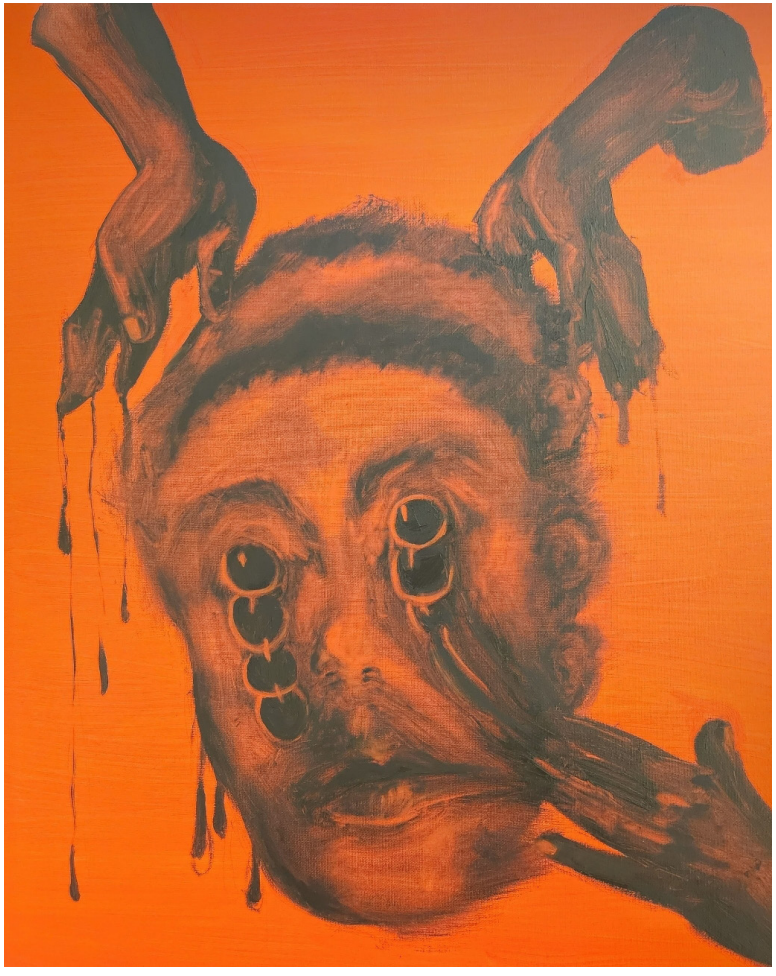
You stay the same.

Murder of these Three Saviors
Naur



Stress Relief
Izzy Giles

Grandma's Memories
Asia Taylor



Self Portrait in Red
Laura Griffin

That Other Half

Bo Ferguson

I'd like to go into your mind someday

so that I might understand you better

why you do the things you do

the things you say to me

the way you feel about me

maybe I'll be able to change your attitude

change it so it may be more positive

positive towards me

help you to be more kind to me

say nice things to me again

love me again

The Tower of World
Rose Davis

Boulder
Gabriel Talley

My grandfather caught fish
From his hospital bed.
He sat at the teething stream
Like a boulder in its mouth.
He cast out his lines
And told the nurses his stories.
He told them what he caught
And that he couldn't swim.

Dreaming of SEGA Tower
Joli

What If ?

Peace

Caught between what I want and what if. My mind stays twisted as you enter in and out filling up my soul leaving me without a doubt that I want something with you but you leave out the blue like a full moon only to return when God knows when. Then there's him who remains a constant and is perfect in every way. The person that makes my day turns even the slightest gray into colorful rays of sunshine and beauty. I love you but is it love truly if I cant wait? Having second thoughts about the man before that gave me a place to recover from the depths of my pain. The what if is nothing but a place holder, holding together my heart in case it breaks, knowing he will be there to catch me when I fall but I've already fallen so hard and fast for the love who gets me. Letting go of the what if means letting go of safety. If the man I fall for falls through

that what if will turn into a what is. But what is right now may never be with the man of my dreams. Like a scene out of a movie there is twists and turns. Every decision made has the equal opportunity to get burned but I cant get hurt again so I keep my what if man. What I want, will it ever want me? Only needing safety because he is crazy and unpredictable. Our conversations so deep yet so cynical. Making me fall deeper with every word he says and his sweet talks swirl in my head making me lay in bed thinking about him in a way only I can dream because in my head he is a king but in his head am I just a thing to be around? No feelings attached like a fallen leaf on the ground? What if I fell too hard too fast, what now? Oh yeah

..... my what if is still around...

Trailing

Peace

Nothing Good Can Ever Last

Krista Rein

Breakable snow globes, covered in dust.

Untidy metal trinkets, covered in rust.

Tiny porcelain animals, staring from the past.

I know that nothing good can ever last.

Keepsakes from vacations, all snapped in pieces.

Every antique book, with the spines covered in creases.

Even the photo album's deterioration increases,

Permanent memories turn temporary, as our time to live decreases.

Lying loved ones now lie dead,

Irreplaceable intuitions decaying in their head.

Very briefly did they realize their dread,

I saw Fate's swift scissors slowly slice open their thread.

Now what remains of them is nothing but a thought,

Gone, with time's inevitable rot.

Onwards, Fate said, as everyone eventually forgot

Nothing good can ever last, so I've learned to cherish what little I've got.

Where I'm From

Savana Bellmon

I am from a quiet place
From anxiety and fears
I am from the mirror.
Rough but beautiful
I am from the sun.
Dark but always hot
Feeling the fire inside
It's too much to handle.
I am from a human.
Always being seen with random eyes
Can't imagine what it's like breathing with my god.
I am from shyness
Can't make eye contact.
Can't talk in-front of strangers.
Strangers are friends, friends are enemies.
I just don't get it, are you proud of me?
I am from support
So happy and cheering from the audience.
They never cheer me on I guess I'll stay anonymous.
Actions speak louder than words.

Asking for a photographer, coming to your games, your relationship counselor
Can you see the real me, I'm right here
Your only thought was for me to disappear.
I am from heartbreak.
Seeing people point at me and saying, "look at her."
I just wanna be perfect like any other black girl
What is wrong with me?
Am I skinny enough?
Prettier?
Popular?

Lightbulb it's my appearance

Where I'm From

I always let my milk spoil

Lena Rios

I'm sitting at a table with a glass of milk
It is very late in the night,
It is very early in the morning
But for me time is at a stand still
No longer does time move,
Nor has it moved ever before,
Nor will it ever move
At least, in this very moment
It's just me and my milk
My milk and me
I could drink this milk
Or
I could pour this milk down the drain
If I fancied,
I could let this milk age and sour
For now I just ponder the milk
I think about it's journey from
Grassy, green, fertile fields planted by stardust eons ago
To the
Bovine, who came from other bovine who came
From other bovine
The bovine that got milked, by a
Farmer who worked tirelessly before
Who is working tirelessly now
Who is going to work tirelessly later
To produce this one glass of milk
And thousands of one glasses
And millions of ones and
glasses and milk

From its mother the milk travels from farm hands
To refrigerators on wheels
that drive hundreds of miles past county lines
And state lines
Straying further and further from its source
To its final steps of its journey
Milk is something that is
87% water
13% proteins, fats, carbs, and most importantly
Vitamins
Does the grocer ponder this?
As they stock the dairy
Pulling the eldest of milk-
The one's quicker to spoil and go rotten-
To the front of the line
You know, the ones you always ignore
You always buy the ones that have a longer,
Y o u t h f u l
Date, to assure that it will last longer
To assure that I will have longer
To sit at night,
And peer
Into
My
Milk

Mushroom Cup and Saucer
Charley Lint

Funeral Flowers

M.K. Bryant

It has been six days since Beverly died, and nobody knows how to act. I'm not sure why so much responsibility has fallen onto me, of all people—I barely knew the girl.

Sure, I saw her at Christmas and on birthdays and on the occasional Thanksgiving, but your long-term boyfriend's second cousin doesn't usually tend to be your best friend in the world.

Every conversation that I ever had with her, which I'm certain I could count on one hand, always revolved around when Brian and I would be getting married. My answer usually fell around the realm of, "I have absolutely no clue, Bev," or, "Please stop asking me about my love life, Bev."

She never seemed to take the hint.

For some reason, I was the first person that Beverly's mother—Brian's first cousin once removed—thought to call for help with funeral preparations. Now, as it's the day that the service is supposed to be, I'm the sole organizer. Brian has been sitting in the back of the sanctuary picking at his cuticles for the past hour and a half while I run back and forth from person to person, trying to get everything done. Beverly's mother sits nearby, watching me intently as if her only daughter hadn't just passed away less than a week ago.

I don't understand why Brian hasn't proposed yet. I'm thoroughly convinced that this family would fall apart without me.

I have three missed calls from my own mother, who I haven't seen all week due to the sheer number of prior commitments I have stacked on my plate. This morning I

listened to one of the messages that she had left me the day before—

"Becky, you need to drop that deadbeat boyfriend of yours and come home. He isn't worth the—"

I hung up before the message ended. No time for that.

People are trickling into the sanctuary, signing their names in the big book that sat at the front of the room—the one that I had paid for with my own money; the one that Beverly's mother still hasn't paid me back for.

Brian is walking to the front now, shaking people's hands and having short little conversations that I'm certain are about nothing. He wipes a single tear from his face, and I hold myself back from gagging at the charade. He barely even knew Beverly. He saw her on all the same holidays that I did, and they didn't even grow up together.

There's a closed casket at the front of the sanctuary that everyone keeps stopping at, saying quiet little prayers and squeezing each other's hands. I'm really proud of the way that the flower display turned out. Red chrysanthemums and white orchids decorate the top of the casket, the red and white contrast providing a sense of elegance and color to the dismal sanctuary.

The musicians from the church are performing one final soundcheck. The woman standing at the microphone sings the first few lines of "Amazing Grace," the violinist and pianist accompanying her. The pastor has shown up at this point, and he's walking around shaking people's hands. He doesn't shake hands normally, though. It's that type of handshake that only pastors do, where they use both of their hands and hold onto you for an uncomfortable amount of time, as if they fear they might float away if they let go too

soon. He makes his way to Beverly's mother, who has a sour look on her face as she reluctantly accepts his handshake. They whisper back and forth to each other, but I don't make any attempt to listen in. I'm just ready for this day to be over. I glance over to where they're talking, and I catch her pointing an angry, well-manicured finger over to her daughter's casket. The pastor pats her on the back before looking up, making direct eye contact with me, and waving me over.

God. I want to leave.

I walk over to them, and Beverly's mother immediately stiffens, eyes narrowing as she acknowledges my presence.

"How are we holding up?" asks the pastor, whose name I believe is Roy or Rob or something along those lines.

"Good," I lie. I wonder if a lie told in a church is worse than a normal lie. I wonder if a lie told to a pastor is worse than a normal lie.

Pastor Roy or Rob reaches out for a handshake, but I pretend not to notice, balling up my fists in the pockets of my cardigan. His hand lingers in the air between us for a few moments before he awkwardly retracts it. Beverly's mother is still glaring at me, her eyes darting back and forth between me and the pastor.

I think that I hate Beverly's mother.

I turn to her and give her the fakest smile I can manage, trying to show as many teeth as possible. I feel so gross, like some sort of monster has made its home in my skin. I feel like, if I make one wrong move, it might take over. I wonder if there's a funeral version of a bridezilla.

She somehow returns an even faker smile than my own, and

she pulls me into an uncomfortable hug that pins my arms to my sides.

Her perfume smells like mothballs, and I can't help but wonder if someone told her it smelled nice.

If they did, they definitely lied.

I guess I can't judge them, though. If this funeral has made anything clear, it's that I'm just as bad of a liar as anyone else. Maybe we're all liars, depending on the situation.

At some point, Brian approaches, clapping a hand over my shoulder before rubbing my back. I want to lean away from the touch, but I don't want to seem rude.

He's the only person here that I find tolerable, after all.

At least, I think I find him tolerable. All day, I've been pondering whether or not my mother is right. She's always had this deep, heavy disdain for him, saying that I'm the only one pulling my weight in the relationship.

I used to think that she was being dramatic. After all, Brian does everything that a good boyfriend is supposed to do, right? He buys me my favorite candy – sometimes even flowers – and he sits and talks with me after I've had a long day at work. It feels like he's doing everything right.

On the other hand, I just planned his second cousin's entire funeral with a minimal amount of help from the rest of his family or him.

Beverly's mother is whispering to the pastor again, acting as if I'm not even there, and I actually pick up on a few words this time.

"Casket..... Wrong..... Beverly..... Roses....."

Pastor Roy or Rob or Bob is nodding intently, one hand placed on her shoulder in what I assume is supposed to be a comforting gesture.

I glance over at Brian, who makes eye contact with me and immediately shakes his head.

Am I really that predictable?

The funeral should be starting in about 10 minutes, and I know that this is one of the worst ideas I could have, but my curiosity gets the best of me.

"Is something wrong?"

Beverly's mother stops whispering, setting her mouth into a thin line and glaring directly at me. The pastor stops nodding and turns his attention towards me as well. Brian removes his hand from my back, and takes a small step away.

Traitor.

Beverly's mother takes a step in my direction, trying to plaster on the sickly sweet smile that she's been using all day but settling for a tight grimace.

"Is something wrong?" I repeat. I feel like everyone in the sanctuary is staring at us.

"The flowers," Beverly's mother says.

"The flowers?"

She nods and dramatically repeats, "The flowers."

I wait for her to elaborate.

Finally, Pastor Roy or Rob pipes up and says, "I think that what Mrs. Hughes is trying to say is that she wishes you had consulted with her before choosing the flower display."

I give him a look that I'm certain isn't very polite before turning back to Beverly's mother.

"What?" I ask.

"You didn't consult with me on the flowers," she reiterates.

"You're joking."

I feel Brian's hand on my arm again, and this time, I jerk away from his grasp.

"I am so sorry that I didn't consult you for a tiny detail in a funeral that you made very clear you had no interest in planning," I continue, "Wow, y'know, I really hope that you can forgive me. I really hope this doesn't mess up our relationship. I really–"

"Becky," Brian mutters, already reaching for my arm again, "maybe we should–"

Pastor Roy or – Rick, that's his name – looks visibly uncomfortable, and I would laugh if I wasn't mad at every single person in the room with me.

"Beverly's favorite flowers were roses," her mom continues, "We need roses."

"We need them? Like right now?"

She nods as I stare at her in complete disbelief.

"The funeral is like, now." I say.

At this point, Brian has taken the hint and stepped off to the side. Pastor Rick – Rick? Am I sure that's right? – is still standing there, hands awkwardly raised in the air as if he wants to physically remove the tension from the air.

The first few rows of pews in the sanctuary are filled with people that I don't know, all gathered to celebrate the life of someone else I don't know.

There's not gonna be a eulogy, because nobody volunteered to do it. The musicians are playing a random assortment of religious songs because nobody knew what Beverly's favorite music was, not even her own mother.

If I had been honest with myself from the beginning, there was never any chance of this funeral going well.

I could yell at Beverly's mother, who's really nothing more to me than another person on the long list of people I don't know. I could throw a fit and make a scene in the middle of the church. I could scream at Brian for not defending me. There are a lot of things I could do right now, really.

"Well?" Beverly's mother asks.

Her arms are crossed and she's angrily tapping her foot, the way that a frustrated cartoon character would do.

I don't yell.

I don't even respond.

Instead, I turn around, walking straight to the front of the sanctuary. I tuck the big book that I paid for with my own money under my arm, and I pick up the big flower display, gathering it up so I can see over the top. I try not to think about how I'm going to fit it in my car.

Beverly's mother is screaming now, something jumbled and impossible to decipher. Brian is just standing there wordlessly, as he usually does whenever there's any sort of conflict. Pastor Rick or Rob or Roy is standing there, blankly staring, and I guess that this is the first time that an angry woman has ever stormed out of his sanctuary minutes before a funeral.

Before this day started, I had this sick fantasy of Brian taking me aside after the funeral ended and proposing. God, at a funeral? Something is wrong with me.

I walk out the automatic door to the church and over to my car. It's red, just like the chrysanthemums that I'm forcing into the backseat.

I text my mom, "I'm coming home, you were right," and I put the car in reverse.

My phone buzzes as I back out of my parking space, and I don't bother looking down at it. I already know what it says.

"Told you so," or something along those lines.

When I get home, I'll haul the funeral flowers out of the backseat of my car, dump them on the kitchen table, and cry. I'll mourn my relationship, which I'm certain is over at this point, and my mom will make me chamomile tea and put on some stupid romcom that I've never heard of. Everything will feel final at that moment, but life will move on. Other men that my mom hates will come along, families in haul, and the cycle will continue.

Justice
Blue Smith

Remembrance

Nico Crow

I was working at a local fast-food chain,

the only job in town to hire a nervous-looking teenager.

The hours were long, they bled into the midnights of June and July.

I could not drive yet, so when my manager,

A senile old man skinnier than the drinking straws that littered

the sticky kitchen floor finally let me go,

I would message my mother, and wait for her

to make the drive in the dark.

That fifteen-minute wait was spent outside in the sweet, suffocating

Summer air under a billboard that advertised some sort of pest control,

decorated grandly with a massive three-dimensional mosquito

which guarded the decimated parking lot it hung over.

I would look back down at the empty road,

leading not three minutes away from the house of an old friend, now a stranger,

and wondered if he thought of me at all.

These were the times after the death of my adolescence.

The times where I could feel my old shell hardening and cracking,

splitting open like the dry skin that Winter brings despite the mid-summer heat.

I was re-birthing and losing myself simultaneously,

losing something you can't ever get back, can't re-set the sun and recycle the moons.

It was in those minutes that my mother had not arrived

and I had not come back from the dead that the loneliness swallowed everything.

There was no one there, despite the silhouette of a sixteen-year-old, aging,

and a giant insect keeping watch over a moonlit building.

Forest Tunes

Nico Crow

The Magician

Mikyle Coleman

What a magnificent magician!
From ice,
you conjure fire.
From monstrosity,
catalyzed to man.
From nothing,
you bring me everything.

Despairing declarations of depression
demanding desperate determination...
And against admirable adversity
assurging above and ascending,
with beauty unmatched and passion unquenchable
stands you.

Glamorous even, standing here
achromatic enigma hiding your
perfervid passion.
Madness! It must be!

For what other reason
could you be here
now
auriferous halo upon your hand?
Divinity sanctifying
fire with ice,
monster with majesty,
and everything with nothing

Sweat; no tears!
Tears? From unknown warmth,
transcendent ardor from you.
With two words
you have me for life eternal,

"I do."

Curtains Close

Mikyle Coleman

From above, the gods weep;
as below, so do myriad humans,
for the grand performance is over.
The illustrious magician
is dead.

Slain by iniquitous quicksilver
delivered by a malefic knave.
With one baleful movement,
my stars were stolen,
my kingdom is halved,
my heart desecrated.

Thief of joy,
why?
Why commit such a depravity?
To damn one with such
beauty and passion unmatched,
truly vile you are.

Once, I had everything;
more than any monster such as I
could ever wish to have.
You have taken
all that made me who I am
and with this, I will undo
all that you are.

Woe to the villianous creature,
who has stolen my world's beauty!
May damnation fall upon thee,
may a baleful imprecation,
unravel the malefactor to his very soul!

I pray to all-
above and below the stars-
that this fiend never find peace,
that this wretch only have misery!
May his life forever more be
a malignant nightmare he never awakens from!
I pray death never caresses him,
disease never takes him,
may nothing ever rend him
from his unending suffering!

Heed my call,
all who are sorcerous,
those who are magical,
and all prestidigitous!
As my heart beats,
as my hate burns blue,
as my blood elixates...

May this hated abomination feel my malice
for all eternity.

“Application to be a Fish”

Jo Ro

So you’d like to be a fish?Well given your extensive resume,

your qualifications for this job are over, under, and sideways.

Which is more fantastic than you could ever know

So maybe we should just go down the ever-extensive list

of reasons why you think you would be a great candidate to be a fish.

One, you like the ocean:

Salt in your water has never bothered you

and you’re not afraid of a predatory stare.

Plus, you recognize that being lost

in a world that is always changing is a given

And even though, being stolen from that world is certain,

you’ve found that you score best in tests of adaptability

rather than strength.

Two, you have a fine palate for exotic cuisine:

A kitchen feels more like home to you anyway.

Even among grease traps you can’t help but feel nostalgic,

although the drops of oil are molten

and they give you freckles.

This is just a chance to test your limits for flavor

in a state with the same flesh dressed in new skin.

Three, you believe the body to be art, especially your own:

Display cases make you feel like you’re in a museum,

even if no one learns anything from you,

to be observed is the closest one can get to being loved.

Even though these neon pebbles make you feel more

like a joke instead of an exhibit.

Even though you’ll probably die in some kid’s pool.

Are you sure you want to be a fish?

You don’t want to be anything else?

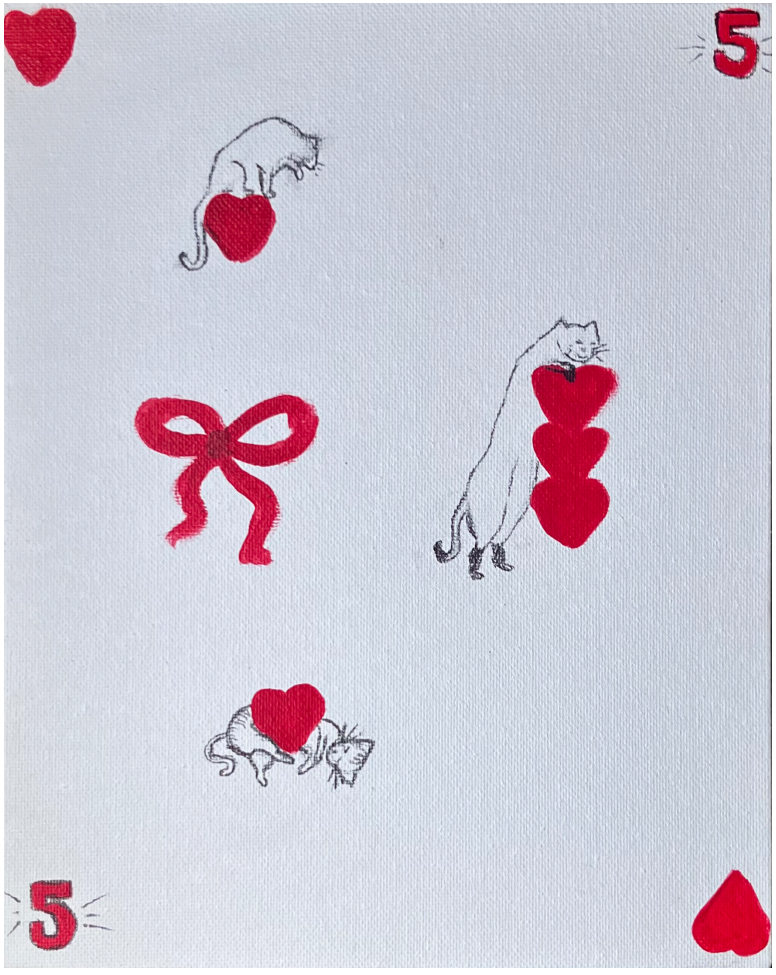
The pay isn’t even that good and there are no benefits

Please, I’m begging you, be anything else.

A dog, a cat, a man, a woman, a child

Be anything else, but this

please don’t submit this application to be a fish.



5 of Hearts
Grace McDermitt

A Fresh Maine Lobster

Jo Ro

Dr. Passman flipped the thick stack of papers on her desk, reviewing their key points with precision and anticipation. Soon she would be faced with her most fascinating case yet, Jacket Juno Weather, a paranoid schizophrenic and infamous girlfriend-killer. She specialized mostly in addiction therapy, but this particular behavioral case was just too promising to pass up. On the news, Jack was a mentally disturbed twenty-two-year-old who just murdered his girlfriend in a psychotic episode in which after the aforementioned murder he went running through the streets of her neighborhood with a can of gasoline and a two-hundred-fifty count pack of matches. According to the notes from other psychologists and therapists, Jacket was a mentally disturbed man that was incapable of distinguishing reality from fantasy and would need extensive help, from medications or otherwise to ever be close to fit to re-enter society if he was ever going to. It didn't matter what was truer if she could make any sort of breakthrough with him, her name would be on tip of every behavioral therapist and psychiatrist in this generation of medicine and the next.

The notes continued to flood the reflective property of her glasses. Every remark was different, and every prescription slightly altered in dosage or brand. Every qualified hand that Jacket fell into always tried something new, no matter how small, and every hand failed. So he was passed along with the pages upon pages of some of Dr. Passman's most esteemed colleagues. Even as she looked at the mere notes before her, she knew the chances of this poor boy ever getting better seemed bleak, but she had to at least meet him, especially after the interviews. Dateline. 2020. Eventually, Forensic Files when he's dead. Everyone wanted to know why Jack did what he did.

She looked up at the clock over the door. Two minutes until their appointment. She leaned back and took in a deep breath. Patients had made her feel uncomfortable before, especially male patients, but she had never worked with a killer before.

There was a light rasp on the door. She looked back at the clock, then her wristwatch. In the moments that it took for her to realize that the clock was fast and the watch was slow, the door was wide open, and in poured a set of four guards, two lined the back wall, and two pulled in the superstar by his arms. They let him go once he was in the chair in front of Dr. Passman's desk. He didn't look at her. He kept his eyes on the guards instead like a child waiting for his parents to leave so he can tell his buddy a new curse word. The guards left them alone without a word, only a distinct shuffle of feet. Once the door slammed close, Jacket got off the chair and plopped down on the couch instead, stretching like a cat.

"So, doc, have you ever had a fresh Maine lobster?" He had a thick New England accent, just like in the television interviews.

"Um, excuse me?"

"A lobster. From Maine, like the state. Have you ever had one?" Dr. Passman could feel her eyebrows knit together, puzzled. It was a simple question, but she found herself at a loss for how to answer. Everything about the session was thrown off the moment the guards threw him on the chair. It seemed that Jacket noticed this and he smiled. "I always like to start these sessions with that question. You know, after so many I just liked to cut to the chase and get to the part where I tell you the story."

"I'm sorry, the story?"

"The story of how it happened. Of what happened, you know." He leaned back and focused his attention on the

ceiling fan and rested his hands on his stomach. His knuckles Dr. Passman noticed, like everything else, were covered in tattoos. His head was freshly buzzed, his face was not which made it only a little difficult to see the tattoos that decorated either side of his cheeks. One was a black outline of a trout, the other a lobster. They were both iconic and appeared on several book-covers retelling the story of Jack and his crimes.

"Mr. Weather-"

"Jacket."

"Jacket. I already know what happened. I think everyone in the country knows what happened. It's been the top case for two years now. And-"

"You just want to know why." His head lulled to one side so he could fix his gaze on her again. Dr. Passman was silent. "You have to listen to me either way. I'll tell you why, but first, you need to know what happened, what really happened. Then we can get on with whatever magic fix you're gonna toss my way."

"Alright then," she mused, "tell me what happened."

Jacket smiled and fixed himself back on the fan, watching the blades turn, remembering. Then, all of a sudden he came to life, "So I worked for this bar. It was alright, a rowdy crowd, but a lot of fun. You know how it is. The work wasn't terrible, definitely built some muscle hauling kegs up and down the stairs into and out of the basement. So that was a plus. But the best part about working there, other than the free beer, was this girl. Anne. You know, the girl from the specials. The girl I- well, you know what I did."

"Anyways, her father owned the place. He was a good guy, a little snooty, but I liked him well enough. He owned all these different bars and restaurants up in the New England states.

Well, Anne and I were dating and I needed a job so he let me come work at the bar. Yeah, he was a good guy." He paused to lick his teeth and swallow some invisible substance that Dr. Passman figured was some sort of grief. "Well, I was working one night and that night was just a fuckin' nightmare. The Sox were playing so I was hauling beer and bodies all through this fuckin' bar. I'm sweating, I'm covered in vomit and a little piss and I was infuriated. And the Sox were losing."

"Then all of a sudden I get this phone call. It's my mom. I can't understand a single fuckin' thing she's saying which tells me that she probably found a friend with some fuckin' H and while I'm busting my ass up and down these stairs, she's been in and out of consciousness and thought it would be a great idea to call me to ask me about to pick up some bullshit that I know we already have at home. And I know that whatever she was asking for me we had at home because we always had whatever she needed at home. I would a call every day from her asking me to pick up something we already had, but I'm getting hung up.

"So anyway, I'm on the phone with her. She's not making any fuckin' sense and I start to panic. At this point, my mom is probably overdosing on heroin. I hang up, tell Anne I gotta go, and book it back home. I was living with my mom at the time. Money was tight, drugs were expensive, whatever."

"I get home and my poor mother is laying on the fuckin' ground in front of the couch. The phone was still in her hand, her shit was all over the coffee table – I kept telling her to stop leaving that shit on the table– and she had these fucking things growing out of her face," he placed two fingertips at the corners of his mouth and pulled them outward several times to gesture at the image of the whiskers, "they were bright fuckin' red, like always.

"I fall to the ground beside her and before I'm about to

call nine one one she wakes up. I tell her I'm taking her to the hospital and she fights me back and forth, back and forth. I finally put down the phone when she said, oh, and I remember exactly what she said so fuckin' clear I can hear it now,

'You're gonna put your own mother in jail? You would do that to me, Jackie?' I fucking hated it when she would call me that.

So I tell her, 'No. No, I wouldn't do that, ma. Just let me help you get to bed.' And I help her to bed. At this point, I'm crying, but thank God, she didn't notice." He paused and wiped the tears that had presently invaded his cheeks away with the back of his hand. He used the sleeve of his jumpsuit to wipe his nose and he continued, "I remember that when we said good night after she said she loved me I said, 'I love you too, ma, but I wish you would stop doing this shit.' I think that was the last time I ever said I loved her.

I obviously missed the end of the Sox game, (they lost) and Anne was pretty pissed that I left her and the bartender without a bouncer, but you know, my mom needed me. What was I supposed to do? Just ignore the call? Let my mom fucking die?

'Of course not, but she shouldn't just drag you away from your responsibilities. You needed to be there, Jack. We needed you. I needed you.'

"That's what she said to me. We had a good fight over it. We screamed we cried, we rolled hips in the back bedroom, we got over it, and then the days went on.

"You know, Anne was a great girl. I miss her every day and that has nothing to do with the story, but I'm so fucking tired of all these specials painting me as this heartless monster that hated his girlfriend. I never hated Anne, I still don't. She was my favorite person, I would have done anything for that

girl. I have never met someone so kind, so beautiful, and smart. God, she was smart."

"But she just didn't understand my life. She grew up rich and I didn't. While her parents were picking their next vacation home, me and Ma were trying to find a homeless shelter that could keep two. I wasn't really young enough or cute enough for her to get mother and child special privileges. We didn't start needing them until I was thirteen when it was too late."

"Anyway, Anne and I didn't see eye to eye on a lot of things, especially when it came to money and absolutely especially when it came to family. Her family had a no-toleration policy for drug-addict relatives and anyone who couldn't pay the bill. That didn't make them bad people, they just believed in hard work over hand-outs. I don't follow that philosophy, personally, but I can live with it."

"Me and Anne always got into fights over my mother. Anne wanted me to live with Anne, I wanted to find a place for my mom to live first. I think she and I both knew that would never happen. There was no one who was going to take in my mom and she couldn't stay by herself. So, Ann and I had these fights where I would pretend like I'm really working on making things happen and I knew that there was nothing to make happen. My mom was going to either have to get sober or die for me to be able to live with Anne."

"So, after the 'Red Sox incident' as we liked to call it, Anne convinces me to put my mom through in-patient rehab. So I did. The day I dropped her off was an entirely different fuckin' nightmare. I would have rather hauled a thousand kegs up a Mayan temple than drive my mom to rehab. She fought me the whole entire time.

'You're really going to leave me there, Jackie? I'll be all alone. I don't know a single person at that place. Please don't take me there, son. I can quit this thing on my own.' That was

an obvious lie, but she kept saying that the entire time. She stayed quiet during most of the car ride, but once we got there and she was checked in and everything was set, she finally hit me with her final blow.

'Jacket. I'll die if you leave me here. You'll never see your mother again. You go ahead and drop me here and be with that girl. I hope you can love her better than you loved me.'

"I lost my temper. I told my mom she was a fuckin' bitch for saying that and that she had ruined my life. That she was most the selfish person I had ever met and I hoped she did die there because at least I would know she died sober." He wiped his face with the back of his hand and his nose with his sleeve, just like before. It was no use. He broke down and began to sob into his palms. Dr. Passman was left speechless and right when she was ready to ask him a question he lifted his head, heaved his breath, and calmed himself down.

He stared placidly and continued, his eyes remained wet for the rest of the story. "When I left her, her skin was bright red and she had lost all of her pores. She had a fucking shell around her to keep the best pieces of her safe I guess. Those sweet pieces that even her own son wasn't allowed to see."

"I went to dinner at Anne's parent's place that night. They had this lake house property that they wanted me to visit. It was a celebration for Anne and me moving in together.

"It was a nice place. Dinner was great. We had lobster. Big, fat tails with butter and lemon. It was probably the best piece of meat I had ever had. It was the kind that melted in your mouth and was just sweet enough to need that little bit of citrus. I could eat a fresh Maine lobster like that every day for the rest of my life, for every fucking meal, and I would be perfectly content. It was perfect, Doc. Absolutely perfect. You gotta try one if you ever head up that way."

"After dinner, before dessert, I get a phone call. Who else

could it be but rehab? I answer. They tell me my mother is dead. Died in her sleep. I have to come right away to make arrangements. They were so sorry."

"I couldn't get a single word in because Anne was infuriated that I had my phone out. I promised her that I wouldn't take it out during dinner. I don't really remember what she said to me. Her words were just noise to me. But I remember how she looked. I remember the silver glean of her hair and skin and the bright blue flash of her eyes and the point of her porcelain canines. I remember the way her hand sliced through the air when she swiped the phone from my hand and hung up the call tip of her finger. I remember the way her face dropped when I told her I wanted to go to bed and I left her and her entire family at the table.

"She caught up with me later that night in the bedroom. She tried to talk to me about what happened. I couldn't hear her. I could see her, but I couldn't her hear. She was wearing a light blue nightgown. I think it was made out of silk. Her hair was tied up and tucked neatly away. She looked like some sort of modern-day princess. Like that opening scene in Grease where you see cartoon Sandy waking up with birds. I almost expected her to start singing. And something about that made my chest hurt and it must have really affected me because then there was just something in me that snapped and I don't remember what happened next. Everyone else does, even you, Doc."

"Eventually I blinked and I was standing in front of this lake community of houses and all the yards were burning. I was covered head to toe in gasoline and I had one last match in my hand. I didn't strike it, obviously. The police came. I was arrested. This happened. That happened. Now I'm here."

"What happened to your mother?"

"She died, Doc. My mother died in a rehab facility."

"After she died, Jack di-"

"Jacket."

"Jacket. What happened after she died? Did you ever have a funeral? Did you ever get a chance to grieve her death?"

He smiled, delighted and surprised. "Isn't obvious, Doc? I ate her."

"Excuse me?"

"Don't fuckin' look at me like that. Don't look at me like all the other ones do. Come on. You were listening to the story. You didn't look away from me for one second, not even to write a note. Don't look at me like it didn't happen. I ate her. It's obvious I ate her. You know I'm not fuckin' crazy."

"No, Jacket. I don't think you're crazy, but how could you have eaten your mother? Did you escape prison? Did you find her body?"

"She was the lobster, Doc. No, no. Don't look at me like that either. I ate my mother, Doc. She became a fuckin' lobster and I ate her. It happens to us all. We all have to do it. I ate my mother. I fucking ate my mother and then I killed my girlfriend. Every man goes through it. Every man has to make a choice between his mom and his girlfriend.'Mom' isn't always a lobster, but everyone eats their mother. I assume everyone eats their father too, but I wouldn't know.

"Doc. You know I'm right. So, why are you giving me that look? You know what? Forget it. I think we're done here Dr..." He looked at her nameplate, "Passman. You go ahead and write your research on me. Prescribe me another antipsychotic and send me back to whatever institution you want to recommend. I don't fucking care. You are just like everybody else. You got your fuckin' chance to gawk now it's time to send me away. You can't help me. You don't

even have the respect to believe me when I tell you what happened. So I'll take my fucking pills and shut up and you can contribute to the memoir of one of many people who got to talk to Jack The Girlfriend Killer."

"Jacket. I'm here to help you. You are very sick and I want you to get better."

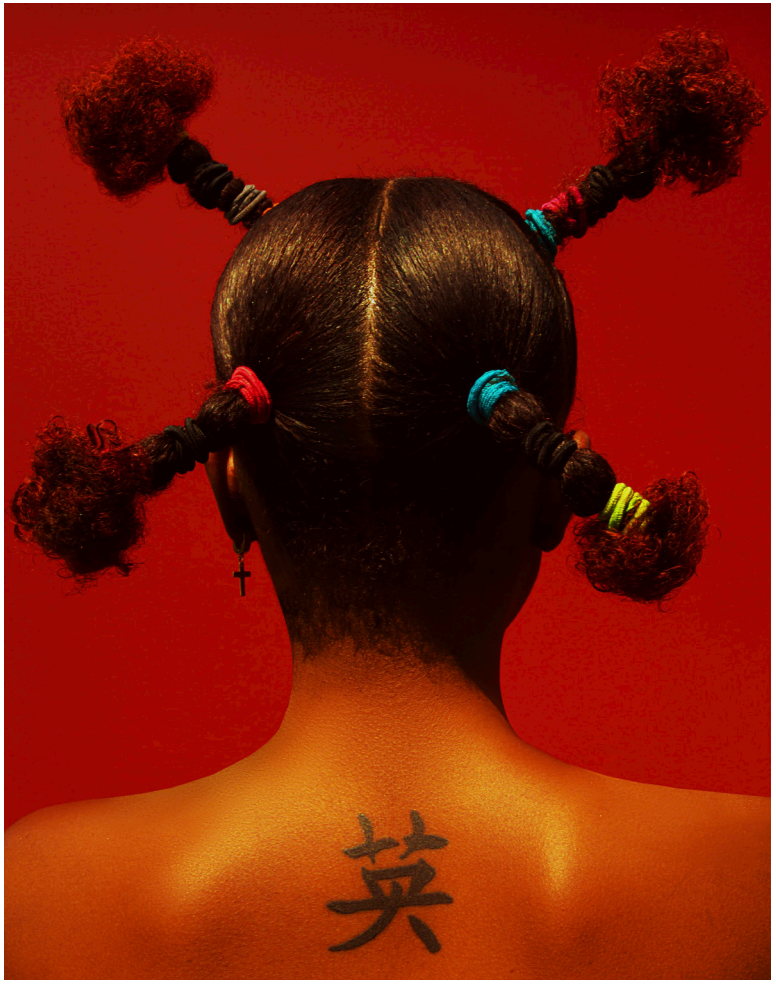
"I'm not fucking sick! That's what happened! I ate my mother for a fucking celebration dinner at my girlfriend's lakehouse and then I killed my girlfriend and burned the fucking house down. Then I woke up just before I was about to light myself on fire. And I'll be honest, Doc, with every doctor visit, tv interview, and fucking fan letter, I regret not lighting the last goddamn match. I would rather be a pile of fucking ashes than hear one more fucking person deny one of the most fundamental truths of life: you either bury your parents or eat them and then have the audacity to look at me with disgust when I react to that choice being taken away from me. I killed Anne because she tricked me. She didn't take my mother away from me, but she let me consume her and she watched me savor every fucking bite."

Beep beep beep. Beep beep beep. Beep beep beep.

Dr. Passman pressed the button on the side of her watch that dismissed the alarm. "That is the end of our session, Jacket. I'm upping your dosage of benperidol and I think we should focus on some ways to handle your anger. I will see you next week."

The four guards came back in and in a methodical moment, Jacket was cuffed, standing, and held by the ars. "Right, Doc. I'll see you then," he said in a pathetic whisper. He was escorted out of the room without another word.

Once he was gone Dr. Passman sighed with the weight of the world and began to massage her forehead. "What a freak."



Courage
Robert Crawford